

MISTER INVOLVEMENT

I could see them dropping rocks off the overpass as I approached. I didn't want my windshield smashed with a rock, so I pulled off the highway and into this dairy bar. I told the girl that some kids were dropping rocks off the overpass, and could I please use the phone to call the cops. She said they didn't have a pay phone, only a private phone for employees. Well then could I use that. No, she said, customers aren't allowed to use the employee phone. But somebody might get hurt, I said. I'm sorry, she repeated, I'm already on probation for letting my girlfriend use the phone. But there's three of them up there throwing rocks, I persisted. Look, I'm busy, go somewhere else, she snapped. I could see I wasn't getting anywhere with her and I knew I probably wouldn't. Okay, I said, give me a banana sundae and a rootbeer and a bag of Fritos. I ate in the car. It felt good to let matters take their own course for once.

LINCOLN'S BAR MITZVAH

It's one of those holidays when federal offices are open but state offices are closed. Your mail comes, but you can't get your car inspected. Partial city services, but not the ones you want. Some schools in session, but not all. Convenience stores doing business, but no butcher shops or fish markets. A few banks, but not the one where your money is. One of those days when you sit around half-embarking on long-term projects. One of those days when the parakeet twitches and stares at you nervously, because, according to its interior clock, you're not supposed to be home.

TO BEAT A CHIQUITA

Bananas. You can't win. I buy a bunch of green ones, thinking I'll eat them in a few days, when they're ripe, but then I forget about them until they're black, and I have to throw them all out. During the brief time that they're yellow, I'm either too busy to eat them or I'd rather have some other kind of fruit. I reach in the basket and pull out an orange or a pear, oblivious to the shiny black bruises already spreading over the entire bunch. I never want them until it's too late to have

them, so I'm forced to buy more. The grocer knows my routine. He displays the green ones temptingly in the window. From his standpoint, it makes terrific business sense.

PORTRAIT OF JUAN

Juan's been part of the maintenance crew
for years
he plays blackjack in the freight elevator
walks around with hundreds of keys on his belt
happily ignores his beeper
nobody talks to him
except when they want a new file cabinet
or when they lock themselves out of their
office, could he come up and open it
the women to him
they're either complete bitches or fabulous
sex goddesses, and he makes sure
everyone knows what he thinks
he works out of this filthy utility closet
with wires and fuses packed into the walls
and he sleeps in there
he's never there when you need him
but he's always there when you don't need him
so you come away feeling
he's essentially there
he really doesn't have a lot going for him
except for one thing:
his lunches
he always has these incredible lunches
meatball heroes with just the right amount of sauce
slopping out the sides, you can smell it in the elevator
riding up with him
looking down at your own anemic bag
of tuna salad, diet Sprite
wishing you weren't so obsessed
with your sodium intake
that you could walk around
with hundreds of keys on your belt
and not feel locked out
of so many things.

CRITIQUE

It's only September
and the supermarkets are already jacking up the price
of candy corn and cranberries. And pecans.